

TAGMEMIC THEORY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION
TO COMPOSITION TEACHING

by

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Table of Contents

	Page
Preface.....	iv
I. Paradigm Lost: The "Current-traditional Rhetoric" and the Search for a Sound Theoretical Base for the Composing Process.....	1
II. The Development of Kenneth L. Pike's Tagmemic Theory.....	8
III. The Use of Tagmemic Theory in Composition Teaching	
A. The Paradigm.....	15
B. The Pedagogy.....	25
C. A Summary.....	37
IV. The Place and Promise of Tagmemic Theory in Composition: An Evaluation.....	38
Notes.....	61
Works Consulted.....	69

Dedication

To my wife, Joan, for her longsuffering, her loving,
diligent support and secretarial/editorial expertise;

to Matthew and Mary for their good-natured patience
with a too-often preoccupied daddy;

and to my parents and grandparents for their financial
and spiritual support without which my schooling would have
been impossible.

Preface

Imagine being invited to a party--a party in which the host and the other guests, not to mention the rationale for the party itself, were unknown. You arrive at the party and, while engaging in polite conversation with the other guests, realize most of the others have the same bewildering ignorance regarding their presence at and the purpose for the party. The host himself, though quite gracious, has no more insight into the party's ultimate purpose than you do--he is just another confused guest looking for purpose and direction. A game soon begins, a game whose goal is vague and whose rules are open to varied interpretation and generally contradictory. No one knows who may be winning, what winning would look like anyway and when the game could be said to be over. Your impulse is to grab your coat and head for the door; but then all seem to be enjoying themselves despite the purposelessness of the play. Eventually the search for meaning and direction becomes tedious, trivial, frankly irrelevant. The important thing is that you are at the party at all, playing. Any newcomers to the party are simply assimilated into the group without formal briefing or initiation which, were it possible, would probably be pointless anyway.

This perhaps overdrawn picture portrays one initiate's entry into the composition field. As one examines the literature of the field he/she is struck by the directionless and contradictory notions frequently offered up to a profession whose members are seemingly "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine." This month's sparkling new insight is (sometimes literally) next month's anachronism. The bases of evaluation and criticism shift often and sometimes disappear altogether. What "really works" may simply depend upon who has the floor at the time. Impressionistic, highly subjective "techniques" have so dominated the marketplace that it has only been in the past sixteen years that a self-consciousness has emerged to challenge the theoretical underpinnings or lack thereof within the profession.

Limiting this self-consciousness to the past sixteen years is not an altogether arbitrary gesture: it dates from the publication in 1963 of Research in Written Composition, edited by Richard Braddock, et al. The work, which became a standard reference in English education, concluded that the state of composition research at that time could be compared to "chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices and makeshift operations."¹ Nineteen sixty-three was also the year Albert Kitzhaber published his survey of composition courses, Themes, Theories and Therapy: the Teaching of Writing